

Karine Polwart's Scottish Songbook

Start time: 8pm

Approximate running time two hours twenty minutes including interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Karine Polwart talks about her inspiration for a project that celebrates 50 years of Scottish pop history through a folk singer's ears.

'On a simple heart level, I love these songs', says Karine, 'they speak to me of place and time, of underdogs and survivors, of resilience and possibility, and of the endless capacity of familiar songs to ring with fresh connections, right here and now. They give voice to things that urgently need saying. They matter'.

Polwart's musical career began exactly twenty years ago as a singer of centuries old traditional Scots songs, which have been given ongoing life by generations of anonymous voices. 'I've always loved songs that have stories, songs that allow me to get inside someone else's experience', she explains.

But it wasn't folk music that shaped Polwart's earliest years. She and her Scottish Songbook bandmate and brother, Steven Polwart, grew up in 1980s central Scotland to a soundtrack of Scottish pop. And it's to songs by bands of this era – The Waterboys, Deacon Blue, Eurythmics and Bronski Beat – as well as by contemporary Scottish artists such as Chvrches and Biffy Clyro, that she brings her interpretive skill as a folk singer.

The Scottish Songbook project draws inspiration from *Rip It Up: The Story of Scottish Pop*, a major 2018 exhibition at The National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. Polwart was featured in the exhibition in her own right, 'sandwiched between Eddi Reader and Deacon Blue and directly opposite The Proclaimers', she laughs. 'I was delighted to be in there'.

In response to the museum exhibition, she and her band curated a Scottish Songbook gig for Edinburgh International Festival last year. It was, she says, 'a huge cuddle of a show – joyous, raucous, poignant, and, at times, almost hymnal. It brought home to me how much these songs matter to so many people, and what beautiful work they can do in connecting us to each other'.

For Polwart, putting together the live show, and the accompanying album, has been a deep excavation of personal memory, social history and contemporary politics. It has spawned also a rich visual collaboration for vinyl and CD with Moray-based artist, Jen Frankwell, as well as a collection of stories, essays and memoir pieces by Polwart, elements of which she brings to tonight's live show.

For Polwart, Dunfermline's Big Country are one of the Scottish bands closest to her heart. 'Their cinematic narratives nailed the emotional fallout of 1980s de-industrialisation, documenting their own people and place in the way that folk songs everywhere do. They sang of my teenage landscape. And the achingly anthemic 'Chance' transports me there'.

And if Big Country conjured the pain of that time for many, Deacon Blue captured a dream, of a council street cleaner sailing an imagined boat 'up the west coast'. Polwart says, 'It's an enchantment of communal feeling to witness a Scottish audience holler "I saved my money!" – even though, there was never (in my opinion) going to be enough money for that boat'.

Elsewhere we strip songs down to skeletal essentials. The Associates, Aztec Camera and Strawberry Switchblade all get a look in. So too does 'The Mother We Share', the post-millennial electro-pop smash that catapulted Chvrches to fame in 2013. 'The band's Iain Cook produced my 2012 album *Traces*. I was

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lucky to get him when I did. I couldn't possibly afford him now! Our version here pares away the synth layers and foregrounds the lyric.'

'But we're not only laying bare. At times, we're adding heft to songs that seem to me to have a prescient quality. In John Martyn's 'Don't Want To Know', he sings: 'it's getting hard to listen, hard for us to use our eyes'; 'Nearly 50 years after he wrote it, I can't help but hear in it contemporary news-saturation, post-truth anxiety and the imminence of climate calamity.' Says Karine.

'The Blue Nile's 'From Rags to Riches' from their magnificent 1984 album 'A Walk Across The Rooftops' speaks to me in a similar fashion: In my mind, it's about global inequality, massed migration, and ecological payback for the mercilessness of twenty-first century capitalism.'

'That's how it is with me. Songs hold signs. They speak again and again of the places, people and forces in me, and around me. They wriggle and expand to accommodate experiences and events.'

Frightened Rabbit's achingly uplifting 'Swim Until You Can't See Land' has done just that. Like Big Country, the band built their repertoire on euphoric despair. But the song is irrevocably altered by the 2018 suicide of the band's lead singer, Scott Hutchison. 'We offer our version as a minding for him, and for others who haven't made it, as well as a hymn to everyday struggling for survival.'

The mounting refrain of Biffy Clyro's 'Machines', 'take the pieces and build them skywards', feels almost like a signature motif for this whole collection of songs, the doggedness of creating something beautiful from all the hardship around us. 'That single lyric line is possibly as close as it comes to a description of my intention and hope as a musician, writer and human being.'

'I come to the rich archive of Scottish pop music with a folk singer's heart. I dig into the songs that connect with me, as centuries old ballads often do too, not because of their retrospective sentimentality, or their uniquely Scottish character, but for their ability to reveal something about living here in this place right now. I love these songs. And, as a band, it's a joy to share them'.

Interviewed by Yewande Adeniran

Performers

Karine Polwart vocals, harmonium, guitar

Steven Polwart vocals, guitar

Inge Thomson accordion, percussion, synth, vocals

Graeme Smillie bass, keyboard

Louis Abbott drums, percussion, guitar, vocals

Calum McIntyre drums, percussion

Produced by the Barbican



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